

# LEADING HARRIS COUNTY BENCHMARKS FOR A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

## • *Message from Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo*

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During this uncertain time, we must do everything we can to put ourselves in the best position to succeed in our fight against COVID-19: manage the spread of the virus, keep the number of cases and deaths low, and keep our hospitals from becoming overwhelmed. Safety measures such as social distancing, wearing face coverings, and staying home from work, school, and social activities are difficult. But, if followed closely, these orders and policies can save thousands of lives. They can give us our best shot at reopening sustainably, rather than driving our community toward the breaking point time and time again, hurting our economy even more profoundly over the long term.

We cannot, at least not now, go back to the way our lives were before COVID-19 emerged in Harris County. We must assess the risk for everything we do. Harris County Public Health has developed the recommendations published here to help us safely navigate our everyday lives and better manage the ebbs and flows in severity of the threat of COVID-19. We must remember that a resurgence of the virus that can knock us down and put us right back where we started, or worse, is right around the corner as long as a vaccine or treatment are not readily available.

We all want to get back to work, see our friends, hug our family, go out to eat, and resume our livelihoods without limitations, but we still have a long road ahead of us to end this epidemic. Here in Harris County, we remain committed to taking whatever actions are necessary to save lives — not just the lives of people with the virus, but the lives of anyone requiring a hospital bed. We will continue this fight to keep you and your family healthy as long as we have to. Here in Harris County, we are in this together.

## • *Message from Harris County Public Health*

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COVID-19 has had a devastating impact globally, nationally and locally here in Harris County. Currently there is no treatment to prevent COVID-19, so prevention is the best way to reduce your chances of getting COVID-19. This includes tried and true actions such as maintaining social distancing from others (6ft or 2m), wearing facial coverings, proper handwashing, and staying home and away from others if you are sick. Extensive social distancing and these other types of interventions have shown to be successful in other countries to prevent or delay a rapid increase in the number of cases and deaths. However, these measures do not eliminate the threat COVID-19 poses within our community.

Social distancing has allowed Harris County to slow down rapid accelerations in the number of positive cases as well as hospitalizations, which has given our public health and healthcare systems more time to prepare for a potential surge of cases. To continue reducing spread and deaths from COVID-19, social distancing and other preventive measures must be sustained, and testing must continue.

Harris County Public Health (HCPH) is continually working to keep the community healthy and safe by conducting its epidemiology (disease detective) work including disease surveillance and investigations; building data and technology infrastructure; coordinating and providing testing, both in the community and at nursing homes and other group facilities; monitoring levels of important supplies and equipment in the healthcare system; and continuing to reach out to educate the community.

HCPH has developed these local public health recommendations as a guide for residents to understand better state and local COVID-19 orders and guidance. It will take everyone in the community working as a team to continue to slow the spread of COVID-19 and ultimately stop this pandemic. We thank all our community, including businesses, faith-leaders, and other partners for continuing to do their part in reducing the spread of COVID-19 in Harris County. We must all come together to combat COVID-19 today and into the future.

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**COVID**  
CORONAVIRUS  
DISEASE  
**19**

In alignment with federal and state guidance for reopening, we recommend a phased process for relaxing social distancing. Below describes the considerations and indicators that help determine the current level of risk of COVID-19 transmission. The system includes four levels of risk: **1: RED, 2: ORANGE, 3: YELLOW, and 4: GREEN**. Local infectious disease specialists and public health experts will use the latest information on local disease activity and these indicators to advise county officials on the risk level that applies. The current level of risk and corresponding recommendations will be communicated clearly to the public on [www.readyharris.org](http://www.readyharris.org)

## Levels of COVID-19 Risk and Considerations for Changing Community Action

Risk Level <sup>1</sup>	Level 1: Severe Uncontrolled Community Transmission	Level 2: Significant Uncontrolled Community Transmission	Level 3: Moderate, Controlled Transmission	Level 4: Minimal, Controlled Transmission
Level Description	<p>Level 1 signifies a <b>severe and uncontrolled level</b> of COVID-19 in Harris County, meaning <b>outbreaks are present and worsening</b> and that testing and contact tracing capacity is strained or exceeded. At this level, residents take action to <b>minimize contacts with others wherever possible and avoid leaving home except for the most essential needs</b> like going to the grocery store for food and medicine.</p> <p>Fully vaccinated individuals may gather indoors or outdoors without wearing masks or social distancing with some exceptions – masks should still be worn while traveling by plane, bus, or train as well as in certain settings like hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, and businesses/ workplaces where required by rules and regulations. <i>Individuals who have not been fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks and social distance. Medium and large gatherings should be avoided.</i></p>	<p>Level 2 signifies a <b>significant and uncontrolled level</b> of COVID-19 in Harris County, meaning that there is ongoing transmission of the virus and that testing and contact tracing capacity is likely sufficient to meet demand. At this level, residents should <b>minimize contact with others, avoiding any medium or large gatherings, and only visiting permissible businesses that follow public health guidance.</b></p> <p>Fully vaccinated individuals may gather indoors or outdoors without wearing masks or social distancing with some exceptions – masks should still be worn while traveling by plane, bus, or train as well as in certain settings like hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, and businesses/ workplaces where required by rules and regulations. <i>Individuals who have not been fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks and social distance. Medium and large gatherings should be avoided.</i></p>	<p>Level 3 signifies a <b>moderate, but controlled level</b> of COVID-19 in Harris County, meaning a demonstrated reduction in transmission and the local healthcare system is within capacity. <b>Residents should remain vigilant</b>, but resume contact with others and resume leaving home.</p>	<p>Level 4 signifies a <b>minimal and controlled level</b> of COVID-19 in Harris County, meaning new chains of transmission are limited and quickly broken or a vaccine and/or treatment has been developed and widely developed. At this level, <b>residents may resume normal contact</b> with others unless sick.</p>
Public Health Recommendations	<p>Minimize contact with others wherever possible and avoid leaving home except for essential needs.</p> <p><i>*Practice social distancing and use face coverings. * If you are fully vaccinated, you can gather indoors with unvaccinated people from one other household (for example, visiting with relatives who all live together) without masks, unless any of those people or anyone they live with has an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.</i></p>	<p>Minimize contact with others, but begin leaving the home for nonessential needs, except medium and large gatherings*. Practice social distancing and use face coverings.</p> <p><i>* If you are fully vaccinated, you can gather indoors with unvaccinated people from one other household (for example, visiting with relatives who all live together) without masks, unless any of those people or anyone they live with has an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.</i></p>	<p>Resume contact with others and resume leaving the home, even for larger gatherings. Practice social distancing and use face coverings.</p>	<p>Resume normal contact with others unless sick.</p>

<sup>1</sup> Local healthcare and public health experts will use the latest information on local disease activity based on these specific indicators to advise county officials on the risk level that applies.



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## Levels of COVID-19 Risk and Considerations for Moving Forward: Red to Green<sup>2,3,4</sup>

Risk Level	Level 1: Severe Uncontrolled Community Transmission	Level 2: Significant Uncontrolled Community Transmission	Level 3: Moderate, Controlled Transmission	Level 4: Minimal, Controlled Transmission
New COVID-19 Cases per Day in Harris County (including Houston) 14-day average	>400 new cases/day	201-400 new cases/day	101-200 new cases/day	<100 new cases/day
% Positivity Rate of COVID-19 Tests (14-day average)	>5%	<=5%	<=5%	<=5%
% ICU Beds in Use for COVID-19 <sup>3</sup> % General Beds in Use for COVID-19	>15%	10-15%	5-9%	<5%
Trend in ICU Bed Population				
Trend in General Bed Population		14-day statistically significant flat or decreasing trend after level change	14-day statistically significant flat or decreasing trend after level change	14-day statistically significant flat or decreasing trend after level change
Trend in Cases				
Widely Available COVID-19 Medical Countermeasures	No/Partial	No/Partial	No/Partial	Yes

<sup>2</sup> Additional metrics are reviewed regularly for inclusion. Calculations such as R0 projections may be utilized as research emerges.

<sup>3</sup> In order to move down the scale of the threat level system (Red>Orange>Yellow>Green), all indicators must be met for 7 consecutive days.

<sup>4</sup> 14 day trends are reset after any change in threat level.

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## Levels of COVID-19 Risk and Considerations for Community Action

Risk Level	Level 1: Severe Uncontrolled Community Transmission	Level 2: Significant Uncontrolled Community Transmission	Level 3: Moderate, Controlled Transmission	Level 4: Minimal, Controlled Transmission
<b>Daily Life</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stay home, except for essential activities.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>2. Avoid and cancel all gatherings of any size. Fully vaccinated individuals may be able to gather in small groups in certain situations. Fully vaccinated individuals can also gather indoors with unvaccinated people from one other household (for example, visiting with relatives who all live together) without masks, unless any of those people or anyone they live with has an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.</li> <li>3. All vulnerable individuals (65+ or with pre-existing health conditions) stay home when possible.</li> <li>4. Self-quarantine responsibly for 14 days if in close and prolonged contact with someone who has COVID-19. Those fully vaccinated do not have to quarantine after an exposure to COVID-19 if asymptomatic, unless they live in group settings.</li> <li>5. Wear face coverings to protect others.</li> <li>6. Essential workers practice special precautions to prevent spread.</li> <li>7. Avoid non-essential business and personal travel. Follow state guidance for quarantine after visiting certain locations.</li> <li>8. Avoid public transportation where possible.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Avoid and cancel medium (10-250 people) and large public and private gatherings (250+ people).</li> <li>2. All vulnerable individuals (65+ or with preexisting health conditions) stay home when possible. Fully vaccinated individuals may be able to gather in small groups in certain situations. Fully vaccinated individuals can also gather indoors with unvaccinated people from one other household (for example, visiting with relatives who all live together) without masks, unless any of those people or anyone they live with has an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.</li> <li>3. All vulnerable individuals (65+ or with preexisting health conditions) stay home when possible. Vaccinated vulnerable individuals should follow increased precautions (masking, distancing, handwashing) in public settings.</li> <li>4. Wear face coverings to protect others. Those fully vaccinated do not have to quarantine after an exposure to COVID-19 if asymptomatic unless they live in group settings.</li> <li>5. Essential workers practice special precautions to prevent spread.</li> <li>6. Avoid non-essential business and personal travel. Follow state guidance for quarantine after visiting certain locations.</li> <li>7. Use public transportation with caution. Practice good hygiene and social distancing.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stay home when possible.</li> <li>2. Minimize attendance at medium (10-250 people) and large public and private gatherings (250+ people).</li> <li>3. All vulnerable individuals (65+ or with preexisting health conditions) stay home when possible. Fully vaccinated vulnerable individuals should follow increased precautions (masking, distancing, handwashing) in public settings.</li> <li>4. Self-quarantine responsibly for 14 days and monitor symptoms if in close and prolonged contact with someone who has COVID-19. Those fully vaccinated do not have to quarantine after an exposure to COVID-19 if asymptomatic unless they live in group settings.</li> <li>5. Wear face coverings to protect others.</li> <li>6. Essential workers follow standard precautions.</li> <li>7. Limit visits to non-essential business and personal travel. Follow state guidance for quarantine after visiting certain locations.</li> <li>8. Continue to use public transportation. Practice good hygiene.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Feel free to leave the house and resume in-person work schedules.</li> <li>2. Resume attending public and private gatherings freely.</li> <li>3. Vulnerable individuals (65+ or with preexisting health conditions) leave home as necessary. Good hygiene and social distancing are still recommended.</li> <li>4. Self-quarantine responsibly for 14 days if in close and prolonged contact with someone who has COVID-19.</li> <li>5. Resume non-essential travel. Avoid other states or countries where widespread transmission may still be occurring.</li> <li>6. Resume full public transportation use.</li> </ol>

<sup>5</sup> Essential activities as defined in the County's Initial Stay at Home, Work Safe order.



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## Levels of COVID-19 Risk and Considerations for Community Action

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<b>Participating in Group Activities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cancel visits to nursing homes, long term care facilities, and hospitals. Exercise precaution when visiting nursing homes, long term care facilities, and hospitals. Cancel visits to see unvaccinated vulnerable individuals.</li> <li>2. Avoid and cancel all indoor and outdoor gatherings, including concerts, rodeos, large sporting events, etc. Schools and after-school activities for youth programs close, as directed by educational authorities.</li> <li>3. Schools, afterschool activities and youth programs should follow strict masking and physical distance guidelines of 6 feet for middle and high school, 3 feet for elementary schools. Contact sports and large school events should be canceled.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Exercise precaution nursing homes, long term care facilities, and hospitals.</li> <li>2. Avoid and cancel medium and large gatherings indoor and outdoor, including concerts, rodeos, large sporting events, etc.</li> <li>3. Phase in some activities for schools following public health guidance. Physical distancing for all grade levels may be decreased to 3 feet. Continue to practice good hygiene and mask wearing.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Exercise precaution when visiting vulnerable populations in nursing homes, long term care facilities, and hospitals.</li> <li>2. Slowly phase in gatherings indoor and outdoor, including concerts, rodeos, large sporting events, etc. Activities should follow any relevant guidance and capacity requirements.</li> <li>3. Phase in additional activities for schools following public health guidance. Continue to practice good hygiene and social distancing.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Resume visiting vulnerable populations while practicing good hygiene and 6 feet of distance.</li> <li>2. Resume large indoor and outdoor gatherings, including concerts, rodeos, large sporting events, etc., and activities should follow any relevant guidance.</li> <li>3. Resume school, after school activities and youth programs as normal.</li> </ol>

<sup>5</sup> Essential activities as defined in the County's Initial Stay at Home, Work Safe order.

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## Public Health Guidance for the General Public

*All of the following public health resources are available on [Harris County Public Health's COVID-19 website](#). This guidance can be used to help you decide how to keep yourself, your family, and your community safe. Guidance is periodically updated, especially as trends in early warning signs change.*

### General Public

HCPH Guidance for [General Public](#)  
HCPH's [COVID-19 Page](#)

### Using Gloves and Face Masks

HCPH Guidance for [Removing Gloves](#), [Using Masks](#) and [Why Masks Are Important](#)

### Reopening Guidance for Industries

HCPH Guidance for [Reopening Different Industries and Services](#)

### Resources for Businesses and Industries

HCPH [Resources for Businesses and Industries](#)

### Returning to Work after COVID-19 Illness or Exposure

HCPH [Guidance for Returning to Work](#)

### Getting Tested for COVID-19

HCPH Information on [Testing](#)

### Data on COVID-19 in Harris County

Harris County [COVID-19 Data Dashboard](#)

### Health Toolkits for Different Communities

HCPH [Community Health Guides](#)

### Vulnerable Populations

HCPH Guidance on [Vulnerable Populations](#)

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## Lowering the Risk of Spreading COVID-19:

Reopening establishments in a responsible way requires the Harris County community to work as a team – employers, employees; business owners, customers; establishments and community members alike. It is critically important for every person to pay attention to possible COVID-19 symptoms and keep track of close contacts.

The virus that causes COVID-19 can be spread by infected persons who appear to have few or no symptoms. Even if an infected person is only mildly ill, the people they spread it to may become seriously ill or even die, especially if that person is age 65 or older with pre-existing health conditions which place them at a much higher risk. That means all of us have a part to play in making sure our community stays healthy and protected. If you believe you are sick, stay home, seek testing immediately, and treatment, if necessary.

Before you engage with the public, do an **honest** self-assessment and screen yourself for COVID-19 symptoms:

- ☐ Fever or chills
- ☐ Cough
- ☐ Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- ☐ Fatigue
- ☐ Muscle or body aches
- ☐ Headache
- ☐ New loss of taste or smell
- ☐ Sore throat
- ☐ Congestion or runny nose
- ☐ Nausea or vomiting
- ☐ Diarrhea
- ☐ Known close contact with a person who is confirmed to have COVID-19

You can access free testing by visiting <http://covidcheck.hctx.net> or by calling 832-927-7575.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- \*Early warning signs aligned with [Texas Medical Center's COVID-19 Data Pack](#)
- [HCPH Reopening Resources](#)
- [Governor's Strike Force to Open Texas](#)
- Greater Houston Partnership's [Work Safe 2.0: 15 Principles to Guide the Safe Reopening of Houston Companies](#)
- [Southeast Texas Regional Advisory Council](#)
- CDC [Guidelines](#)
- Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA.gov](#)
- U.S. Department of Labor [OSHA](#)